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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7090
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0488
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7477
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5628
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4084
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1498
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4130
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3223
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8071
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5676
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0430
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2403
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001479

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: AIR BASE ATTACK RESULTS IN HEAVY
DAMAGE, NEW SECURITY PROCEDURES

REF: A. STATE 148016
[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1444
[1](#)C. COLOMBO 1425

COLOMBO 00001479 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James R. Moore, for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: Reports of damage from the October 21 attack on the Anuradhapura air base (ref A) remain varied. The Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) reports 8 aircraft destroyed and 14 SLAF casualties, including two pilots. According to a U.S. defense contractor, approximately 75 percent of the SLAF's airborne surveillance capacity was destroyed in the attack. SLAF contacts report that the LTTE ground attack caused most of the damage; they say that two bombs dropped by the LTTE aircraft missed their targets and caused little or no damage. Various investigations are currently underway to determine what security lapses led to the attack. President Rajapaksa has taken the responsibility for the security of air bases away from the SLAF and given it to the Army. He also appointed Major General Sanath Karunaratne to the newly created post of Overall Operations Commander for Anuradhapura. This attack, and the previous one near Yala National Park (ref B), are serious blows to the GSL's claims of having weakened the LTTE. The loss of a significant amount of surveillance capability will complicate efforts by the Sri Lankan military to make inroads in the North. En Summary.

Mixed Damage Reports

[1](#)2. (C) Reports of damage from the October 21 attack on the Anuradhapura air base (ref A) remain varied. The Sri Lankan Air Force (SLAF) reports that 8 aircraft were destroyed including one MI-24 helicopter gunship, three PT-6 trainer aircraft, one K-8 jet trainer, one Beechcraft, one MI-17 helicopter, and the Bell 212 helicopter that crashed. Sunday Times defense journalist Iqbal Athas adds two UAVs to that

list and one additional PT-6 trainer. Embassy contacts report that as many as 3 UAVs may have been destroyed and 1 damaged. One additional MI-17 helicopter and another MI-24 helicopter may also have been damaged. The Assistant Government Agent in North Central Province confirmed that the cause of the Bell 212 crash was likely friendly fire. Embassy ODC FSN, retired from the SLAF, reports that the SLAF should still have 6 undamaged MI-24 helicopter gunships. (Note: We have not heard any reports of damage to the SLAF's MIG 27 or Kfir fighter jets.) SLAF contacts report 14 SLAF casualties, including two pilots.

Surveillance Capability Reduced

13. (C) SLAF contacts as well as a visiting US defense contractor report that the destroyed Beechcraft King Air 200T was equipped with an obsolete Israeli forward-looking infrared system, and was scheduled to receive an upgrade to a third generation Star Sapphire III system. The SLAF's remaining King Air 200 is equipped with High Star synthetic aperture radar which has been broken for over two years. According to the U.S. defense contractor, approximately 75 percent of the SLAF's airborne surveillance capacity was destroyed in the attack. SLAF is looking to replace the King Air 200 as soon as possible through the purchase of a "non-missionized" King Air 200, which the contractor believes would not require a U.S. export license and could be delivered in as little as 30 days.

Black Tigers Well-Armed and Well-Connected

14. (C) SLAF contacts report that the LTTE ground attack involved between 20-30 cadres armed with rocket propelled

COLOMBO 00001479 002 OF 002

grenades (RPGs) and small arms. Press reports indicate the LTTE fighters wore military uniforms and explosive suicide belts and were armed with T-56 rifles, AK-47s, Czech automatic pistols, light anti-tank weapons, RPGs and launchers, light machine guns, Mark 82 Chinese hand grenades, and improvised explosive devices. Almost all of the damage to aircraft was caused by the ground attack. SLAF contacts say the two bombs dropped by the LTTE Zlin Z-143 aircraft missed their targets and caused little or no damage. According to local press, the LTTE cadres carried walkie-talkies, satellite phones, and mobile phones with them and were able to communicate with their controllers in the Vanni up until the last couple of cadres were reportedly killed at around 9 a.m.

GSL Searches for Answers

15. (C) Investigations are currently underway to determine what security lapses led to the attack. A Court of Inquiry chaired by Chief of Staff for the Air Force, Air Vice Marshal PB Premachandra, is probing the attack on the air base. A second Court of Inquiry is looking into the crash of the Bell 212. A third probe is being conducted by the Criminal Investigation Division of the Sri Lanka Police. President Rajapaksa has taken the responsibility for the security of air bases away from the SLAF and given it to the Army. He also appointed Major General Sanath Karunaratne to the newly created post of Overall Operations Commander for Anuradhapura. Karunaratne now has command over all security forces in Anuradhapura District, including police, and his responsibilities include oversight of intelligence activities, civil/commercial security, and civil defense.

16. (C) COMMENT: This attack, and the previous one near Yala National Park (ref B), are a blow to the GSL's claims of having significantly weakened the LTTE. It appears obvious that the LTTE had current, detailed intelligence on the security situation at the base and the aircraft, including

the Beechcraft, that would be there. The LTTE's use of aircraft was likely for propaganda value since they did not appear until the ground attack has already proven successful.

The loss of a significant amount of surveillance capability will make it more difficult for the Sri Lankan military to make inroads in the North.

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